

## Overview

Wisconsin's State Assembly, the lower house of the Wisconsin Legislature, is divided into 99 districts. Members are elected to two-year terms without term limits; all seats are up for re-election in 2018. Currently, Republicans hold 63 seats in the Assembly, Democrats hold 35, and one seat (District 58) recently became vacant due to the death of Rep. Bob Gannon.

As of this writing, the Assembly districts are before the Supreme Court due to a lawsuit alleging an illegal gerrymander. While the evidence for gerrymandering is indisputable, this preview runs under the assumption that no new maps will be available by November 2018 (indeed, the Supreme Court will likely not rule until June, and the GOP-controlled legislature may well do nothing about the map until after the 2018 elections). Therefore, everything that follows assumes that the current map will be in effect for the 2018 election. And if this is the case, our prospects in Wisconsin are very limited. Very few seats are in the range where they could be feasibly flipped, and flipping 15 seats to win control of the Assembly would be almost impossible. If the map remains the same, our goal should be to pick up a few seats and rebuild our party brand in Wisconsin, so that we are in a better position for 2020 and beyond (especially if new maps are put into effect by then).

## Approach to Assessing Districts

Fig. 1 shows the current make-up of the 99 districts in the State Assembly. Democratic strength is focused almost entirely in the major cities of Milwaukee and Madison; the smaller cities of Green Bay, Eau Claire, Oshkosh, Racine, and La Crosse; and a couple of rural districts in the northwest. Republicans hold most of the rural and suburban seats in the state. Our best pick-up opportunities are in the rural swaths of southwestern and central Wisconsin, where Democrats consistently won at the Presidential level until 2016, and a few districts in suburban Milwaukee and Green Bay.

The state-level political map actually correlates pretty well to the 2016 Presidential map. Democrats did very well in the same counties Hillary Clinton won, while many of the swing counties are in counties that are historically Democratic but swung hard to Trump in 2016. On the surface, this is promising, as Trump's popularity has dropped drastically in Wisconsin, leaving him over 50% disapproval at the time of this writing. Unfortunately, even the most effective anti-Trump attacks run into a bigger obstacle: unfair districts.

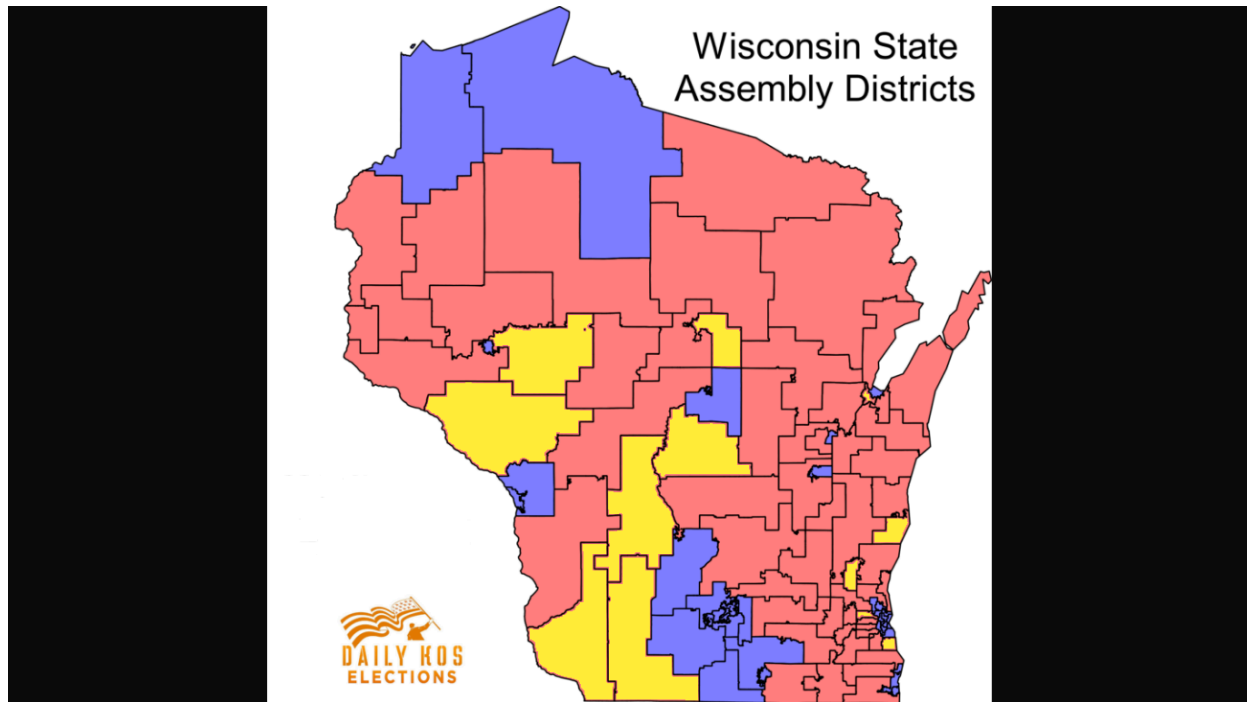


Fig. 1. Current control of State Assembly districts. Red districts are Republican, blue ones are Democratic, and orange ones are held by a Republican who won under 60% of the vote in 2016. Adapted from a map from Daily Kos.

### The Impact of Gerrymandering

After Governor Scott Walker and the GOP came to power during the red wave year of 2010, they implemented a stunningly gerrymandered map which was designed to block any Democratic path to power. And it's been incredibly effective.

Since the 2012 election, which established the current map, there have been 198 total races (99 per year). In that time, only four races resulted in a flipped seat. Most elections simply aren't competitive. And it can be seen in the year-to-year numbers. I flag any district in which a Republican won with under 60% of the vote as a potential pick-up for us. Only eleven districts in 2016 fell into this category. In Iowa, which has proven far more Republican than Wisconsin in recent years, 20 out of 100 races fell into this category. Even in deep-red Kansas, 23 out of 125 races were potential pick-ups! Race after race in Wisconsin was won by a Republican with 60-65% of the vote, just the kind of safe margin that gerrymanders are designed to create.

Additionally, Democrats consistently won uncontested races or won by enormous margins, a sign that their base has been packed into a few districts. Only seven Democrats won against a Republican challenger in 2016; the rest were uncontested or faced third party opposition only. And why would Republicans run? They've almost got a supermajority just by showing up to the districts they designed to be winnable!

All this makes any path to victory in 2018 exceptionally difficult. Beating the gerrymander would require a massive wave, and even a projected Democratic shift in 2018 may not be enough. Even in light of this, we've got an important mission to accomplish while we fight the unfair map in court, and that's rebuilding our party to Wisconsinites.

### **Never Mind Gerrymandering: Why Don't They Like Us?**

Now I'd like you to take a closer look at our year-to-year results. Notice something about almost every GOP-held seat? What I'm getting at is that we've lost support in most of those districts since 2012. There was some level of rebound from 2014 to 2016, but we're still underwater from where we were. And even though it's disgustingly unfair that we won the popular vote in 2012 and still saw Republicans win a large majority in the Assembly, the fact is that we still didn't win the popular vote in 2014 or 2016, despite Governor Scott Walker doing dreadful things in the state. So at this point we have to ask ourselves: Without blaming gerrymandering, why did we lose Wisconsin?

The first major consideration is rural voters. Our approval with rural Wisconsinites has been terrible in recent years, and getting worse and worse. There's a major perception that Democrats only care about urban areas, and that Republicans are the party who looks out for their interests. Of course this isn't true - Walker's budget slashed funding for rural infrastructure, and his refusal to accept the Medicaid expansion prevented near-poverty people from getting health coverage - but perceptions are everything on Election Day. And Wisconsin's geography means that there are a lot of rural districts in the Assembly. If we write them off, even without gerrymandering, we aren't going to win.

The state Democratic Party needs to make rural outreach a top priority. Step one is to run someone in every district. As I say in almost every preview, nothing screams "I don't care about you" to voters like not running anyone. Even if it's an unfair race, find someone to take up the challenge. They'll be well-situated for when there is a fair map in Wisconsin!

Step two is for the Gubernatorial candidate to spend less time in Milwaukee and Madison, and more time in little towns all over the state. Go to the county fairs, the 4H Club meetings, and the small-town churches. Make yourself a fixture in rural Wisconsin. Appear with those courageous Assembly candidates and give your support. Gerrymandering cuts both ways, and those urban districts are safe as safe can be. But we need to show that we're the party of all Wisconsinites. We're doing fine in the cities; now we need to get rural Wisconsin on board.

On top of all this, we've got to articulate how our policies will benefit all Wisconsinites, from downtown Milwaukee to the farms and logging towns. The big issue is jobs. While Wisconsin's unemployment rate has fallen under Walker, the jobs that have been created are mainly low-paying jobs with inconsistent hours. Combine this with reduced access to social services, and many Wisconsin residents are in dire straits despite the rosy job reports. Good jobs for every part of the state needs to be our focus over the next year. Call out the fact that rural Wisconsinites don't have the high-paying jobs they used to, and come up with diverse plans to

encourage the development of quality jobs. Maine is discussing nanofibre plants where there used to be logging plants - this is just one example of the sort of innovation we need to encourage long-term sustainability. Also, re-investing in rural infrastructure will create construction jobs in the short term, and open up new economic opportunities in the long term. Think quality jobs, and call out Walker for trapping his people in poor opportunities with few rights. And while unions have become a dirty word after the right-to-work fight earlier this decade, advocating for more workers' rights and equitable tax distribution are winning ideas, too.

### **Prospects for 2018**

All of this, unfortunately, is building for a future where we have a fair map. If we are the party of quality, high-paying jobs, we can win back support in Wisconsin - maybe even a majority of the popular vote. But thanks to gerrymandering, our prospects for 2018 are grim.

There's an upcoming special election for District 58, and these low-turnout elections can be a chance to capitalize on anti-Trump blowback. But it's a tough district; we haven't run anyone there since 2012, and they voted for Trump by over 40 points in 2016. I still list it as a potential pick-up because special elections are so unpredictable, and I expect we'll at least try, but a win would be surprising.

That leaves just eleven districts in potential pick-up range. And many of them are just barely there, to the point where it doesn't feel like we have a great chance. Districts 51, 85, and 92 were all quite close last year. In a blue wave year, in which multiple districts shift to the Democrats by 5%, they'd all flip. If the shift is larger, other vulnerable districts could include 14, 49, 50 and 72. However, flipping the Assembly is almost certainly not going to happen. 2018 is all about building for a future with a fair map. And it goes without saying that taking down Scott Walker is of the highest importance - but that's a topic for another preview.

I would expect the three districts I identified above to flip next year, if we can make opposition to Trump and good jobs for Wisconsin the centrepieces of our campaign. Maybe even five or six districts will flip if everything goes beautifully. But as I said above, this is a building year. Our goal is to get into every district and improve our standing for the future.

### **Potential Pick-ups in 2018**

I've already set out the general strategy above, so here are some districts to watch for next year:

- District 51: This district is in the southwest corner of the state. It was a longtime Democratic district at the Presidential level, until 2016. Farming is very prevalent here. Although unemployment is low (3.5%), incomes are also below the Wisconsin average. This is exactly the kind of district we need to go after: fight for the rights of blue-collar workers and farmers, and make sure they have the means to make a living.

- District 85: A district in central Wisconsin designed to lump the towns of Wausau and Rothschild in with a big swath of rural area (gee, I wonder how those towns tend to vote?) Many workers here work in administration, production, and sales. Unemployment is high here, at 6.0%. In this district, it will be necessary to have a strong jobs plan. Not just minimum wage jobs, but stable, dignified ones where it's possible to earn a living.
- District 92: We lost this seat in 2016, but it's close enough to flip back with a strong candidate. It's a rural district not far from La Crosse, on the Minnesota border. The population here is older and less wealthy than the Wisconsin average, and farming and production jobs are prevalent. Healthcare and infrastructure will be vital issues - specifically, Walker and the GOP's refusal to expand Medicaid and allow voters in this district to have health insurance. And with stagnant incomes, workers will want to see a plan to attract better-paying jobs to this district.